

Nostalgia as a Diasporic Representation in Govinda Raj Bhattarai's *Muglan*

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Abstract

*The major focus of this paper is on 'nostalgia' as a diasporic representation in *Muglan*, a novel by Govinda Raj Bhattarai. The main characters Sutar Kanchho, Thule, Shekhar Karki, Rai Kanchho and many others leave home in the eastern Nepal and go to India for joining the Indian army. When they are misguided to Bhutan from Siliguri, India and made to work in the Road Construction site, they know that their dream of being army and earn a lot for their families can never come true. They are forced to work hard for almost no payment. Some of them die of hunger. They remember home, family members, cattle, field and relatives in their village in Nepal. They hope to return home one day, but that day never comes. Some of them die helplessly. Because of extreme exploitation over them, they feel alienated and displaced which cause nostalgia in them. Since nostalgia is one of the important features of diaspora, the experience of the characters in *Muglan* is diasporic. As this study is based on qualitative research the researcher has consulted books, reviews and journal articles related to 'nostalgia' and 'diaspora.' This is a new concept in the research on *Muglan*. It will be a new way for the support of the upcoming researchers in the concerned area.*

Keywords: Homeland, host land, displacement, alienation, exploitation, homesickness

Introduction

Every day we observe the flow of people flying abroad. They go to the foreign land for a study, work, business, or an official visit. When they are in the host land, they do have some sorts of difficulties, such as communication, cultural activities, working and dealing with situations that appear. This naturally happens in a new place of everything new. People begin missing home, family members and relatives in the homeland. They desire for 'lost time' as well as 'lost space' (Gordinsky, 2017, p. 404).

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If they are in big troubles, the extremity of missing past moments in the homeland becomes high. Missing home and homeland or past moments is ‘nostalgia.’ Janelle L. Wilson (2014) states, “Nostalgia literally means ‘homesickness’” (p.21). In the host land, people have problem of assimilation with the new society and environment. They cannot speak the foreign language well. They have trouble in following the culture, customs and traditions in the new land. Moreover, they cannot follow their own language, culture and rituals, either. As a result, they “desire for home” (Leela, 2012, p.36). They have obstacles in getting mixed up in the new society. They feel totally displaced, dislocated and alienated in colleges, working places, business centers and offices. Sometimes, they happen to be victim of discrimination as well, because they are the outsiders in the foreign land. As a result, they suffer from ‘nostalgia’ of nears and dears in the homeland as an “emotional attachment to place” (Dora, 2006, p. 211). They become diaspora and their experiences are diasporic. There is a connection between ‘nostalgia’ and ‘diaspora.’

In the novel *Muglan* by Bhattarai, Sutar Kanchho and Thule reach Siliguri, India. They want to join the Indian army and have a comfortable life in future, but a human trafficker Rane dai misleads them and takes them to Phuncheling, Bhutan. Their dream of being army in India is completely shattered because they are forced to work in the road construction. Along with them, other many Nepali youths are also brought. All of them are betrayed by Rane dai. They cannot run away in the dense and remote jungle. It is a new place for them. They are neither paid well nor allowed to leave the job for home. Some of them die of malnutrition. They miss home only, but there is no way to escape from there. They regret running away from home. They remember their family members and feel sorry to them for being unable to fulfill their needs. They feel isolated and have nostalgia a lot. They become victims of the unfriendly administration in Bhutan, the host land. They realize that poverty of their homeland is much better than the pain they have in the foreign land. The nostalgic experience and the realization of the characters in *Muglan* is obviously diasporic. The researcher aims to study on ‘nostalgia’ as a diasporic representation in *Muglan*.

Theory of ‘Nostalgia’ inside ‘Diaspora’

‘Diaspora’ comes from Greek language to denote ‘scattering.’ The scattering is especially of people in the foreign land away from their homeland. The Greek term *dia+speirein* means ‘to scatter,’ ‘to spread,’ and ‘to disperse’ (Cohen, 2008, p. 21). When people are in a foreign land, they are the strangers there and the new things of the new land are also strangers to them. The people, their languages, culture and traditions

in the host land are all new for them. They can have “difficulties in adjustment” (Joshi, 2004, p.85) in the new society. They may have problem from some very simple things like talking, walking, eating, cooking to meeting people and working in offices. They are not used to the new language, culture, politics and economy of the host land. What is more, they cannot apply their own language and culture with the people of the new place.

While going through the evolution of the theory of ‘Diaspora,’ we should talk about the diasporas from the ‘Jewish Diaspora’ to the ‘modern days’ diasporas.’ In the Classical diaspora, the Jewish Diaspora, the Jews were chased away from their land Judah when they were attacked by their enemies. In Helen Clifford and Joel Mokyr’s (2003) words:

Jewish Diaspora refer to the geographical dispersion of the Jews when, between 597 and 586 BCE, the Assyrian king Nebuchadrezzar conquered the kingdom of Judah, destroyed Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem, and deported many Jews to Babylon. Another group of Jews fled to Egypt, where they settled in the Nile Delta. Thus from 597 BCE onwards there were three distinct groups of Jews: a group in Babylon and other parts of the Middle East, a group in Judaca, and another group in Egypt. (p.204)

The Jews were dispersed in the different nearby countries. They had a lot of obstacles in the new places. They had to struggle hard to survive. They experienced “enslavement, exile and displacement” (Cohen, 2008, p.22) in the host land. They could not return to their homeland though they longed for. They remained there as the ‘Jewish Diaspora.’ There came other diasporas such as African diaspora, Armenian diaspora, Irish diaspora and so on. The African people were transported to the Western countries as slaves during the European imperial movement. The Armenians fled abroad due to the genocide and Irish people became victims of poverty and religious conflict and left their country. In the modern era, the source of the formation of diasporas has been wide. The people without being forced if they go abroad for study, business, work and some other purposes, they are also considered ‘diaspora’ such as, Nepali diaspora, Indian diaspora, Chinese diaspora, Japanese diaspora and others. According to David Jary and Julia Jary (2000), “The term ‘diaspora’ is a situation of any group of people dispersed, whether forcibly or voluntarily, throughout the world. Referring particularly to the Jewish experience, the term

may be applied to any comparable migrant groups” (p.154). The formation of diasporas increases because of the people’s high mobility into various countries.

Either people reach abroad voluntarily or involuntarily, they face similar difficulties in the host land. In the moment of pain especially they suffer from nostalgia. It helps them reduce discomfort to some extent. H. A. Kaplan (1987) argues that “There is no one who at one time or another has not experienced nostalgia” (p.465). All people in diaspora long for home and homeland. Automatically, they have “yearning for the past” (Gordinsky, 2017, p.404). They get upset being separated from their family members and relatives. In the host land, they experience dispossessed and lonely, and regret leaving their homeland. For G. Rosen (1975), the ones “who are uprooted, whose social contacts are fragmented, who are isolated and who feel totally frustrated and alienated” (p. 340) get nostalgic. Every diaspora has nostalgia while struggling for survival in the foreign land. In *Muglan*, the characters such as Sutar Kanchho, Thule, Shekhar Karki, Moktan vai and many others leave Nepal for India, but reach Bhutan unfortunately and make diaspora. They get dispersed helplessly in the host land. They get victimized in the road work in Bhutan. Their dream of joining the Indian army become shattered. Neither they can earn money nor return home in Nepal. They only miss Nepal and die in the host land. They are the diaspora and have diasporic experience.

Nostalgia in Siliguri, India

Sutar Kanchho and Thule want to join the Indian army and get relief from poverty in their family. From Darjeeling market, they do not return home in Nepal, but go to Siliguri, another city of India, without informing their families. They get little excited seeing the scenes of the city, but they have troubles in the new place at the same time. However, they are glad to imagine “of being recruited in the army” (Bhattacharai, 2012, p. 2). They do not have money to buy food. They miss home when they are very hungry and tired. They do not have any idea about where to stay at night and what to eat. They are the strangers to the city and so is the city to them as “They can be deemed not to belong there” (McLeod, 2015, p.212). Sutar Kanchho has a little confusion and asks Thule, “What to do now brother? Now we might get into trouble, neither is there any way of returning back home” (Bhattacharai, 2012, p.16). He thinks it is better to return home than getting lost in the new place. They miss home this time in such “a displaced position” (McLeod, 2015, p. 211). They have nothing to eat and satisfy their hunger. They have no secured place to take rest in when they are tired. Each moment of pain in the foreign land makes them miss home as Bhattacharai (2012) writes:

They had never gone through such an unbearable situation with *dhindo-roti* always available at home, but now they were experiencing death by starvation. They thought of their home back, and along with it came in their mind the memories of the moments they had spent in their jungle; cattle-sheds and the water-tap. (p.18)

They realize that whatever simple meals they had in home is much more tolerable than the malnutrition they suffer from in the host land. Every misery pushes them back to the memory of their village. They miss their jungle, cattle, water-tap, fields and the surrounding in the homeland. However, they have a little hope of getting into the army in India.

Rane dai, a human trafficker appears and tempts them his support to admit them in the army. They join a group of youths like them who are grouped by Rane dai. They are all young and innocent people from Nepal. While talking and joking in group, they sometimes remember home in Nepal. They try convincing each other by saying, “When you return home wearing a slanting beret cap, baggy pants and tie-up boots, with you walking ahead and a few porters following you with your trunks, only then will your coming here be meaningful. Don’t you think so?” (Bhattarai, 2012, p. 29). They hope to be in the army and establish a comfortable life ahead. Almost all of them are of similar ages. They understand each other well. Some of them smoke cigarettes that remind them of their village tobacco. One of them argues that their village tobacco is much stronger than the one they have in Siliguri (Bhattarai, 2012, p. 30). Time and again, things make them have a nostalgia of home. “The memory of homeland” (Shakya, 2014, p.122) does not leave them alone. However, the unkind Rane dai betrays them. Instead of admitting them into the Indian army, he cheats by taking them to Phuncheling in Bhutan for road work.

Nostalgia in Phuncheling, Bhutan

Sutar Kanchho, Thule, Shekhar Karki and their companions are all very upset in the new place, Phuncheling. When they know they are brought there for the road construction, they have no hope of being in the army at all. It is a very hard work for them. They experience displacement and “un-homeliness” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 120). They have to bomb-blast huge rocks, fell trees and pull hills in the icy land. Some of them fall off the slopes and die. Some die of illness due to lack of medical treatment, nutrition and rest. The hunger, tiredness, disappearances and deaths of their friends cause them a feeling of “maimed from inside and shattered completely” (Bhattarai,

2012, p.48). The authority pays them very little money and almost not at all. They have never had good meals to eat even in the festival periods. They cannot raise voice against the injustice as they are in the condition of “out- of- placeness” (Nandan, 2008, p. 85). They even cannot run away in the dense jungle of the new place. Moreover, when they are caught running away, they are punished harshly. They have a nostalgia of their family members and relatives in Nepal as Shekhar Karki speaks, “I feel very gloomy now. My parents might be shedding tears thinking of me. I had never thought that I would have to suffer like this. I don’t have a single penny in my hand of whatever I have earned so far” (Bhattarai, 2012, p. 66). They are treated badly as they have “foreignness of the alien land” (Sujarita, 2009, p.59). They are totally displaced in the host land. They long for home, but cannot return to their homeland.

Sutar Kanchho, Thule, Shekhar Karki, Moktan vai and others remember their home and family members a lot. They cannot join the army as Rane dai, an agent of human trafficker cheats them. Their dream of earning a lot of money and have a happy family life in village has been cruelly looted away. They are trapped in the highly tiresome road work where they neither get much money nor have good life, but only miserable days. The frustration in them “creates desire for home” (Pal, 2016, p.86) in their homeland. However, Thule does his best to generate hope of returning home in his friends as he says, “We will have one thousand each to take with us when we return home next year” (Bhattarai, 2012, p.50). Though it is very hard for them to collect that much amount, Thule’s convincing words helps to comfort themselves to some extent. There is no another way to reduce pain than having a hope for goodness as each moment is “embittering, frustrating and morbid” (Barkan and Shelton, 1998, p.11) in Bhutan. They try to escape from the disastrous pain in the road work only through the memory of home.

The festival times become very hard for them to manage themselves. The people in the authority celebrate Dashain eating delicious foods, but the workers from Nepal cannot enjoy it because they do not have money. They are “excluded from feeling they belong to the ‘new country’” (McLeod, 2015, p.208). They become the victims of extreme exploitation and discrimination in the foreign land. They only miss the moments they celebrated festivals with their family members at home in Nepal. Shekhar Karki is again nostalgic: “On the eve of Dashain, my parents might be weeping like anything in my absence” (Bhattarai, 2012, p.67). The memory of home is only a source to keep them managed a little in the host land. The situation is greatly frustrating when Lale Subba dies and Thule also goes missing and may be dead. Rai Kanchho is also seriously ill, but the administration does not care him at all. About his misery Bhattarai (2012) writes:

The Rai who had left his parents, home and his village with a hope of seeing them again after being recruited in the army and earning money, and making his and their life comfortable, was lying lifeless today, offering the last breath of his life to 'Ha Dzong' on a bare hill, without even being noticed by the vultures and jackals. (p.80)

Sutar Kanchho, Shekhar Karki and his friends try to support Rai Kanchho, but without medical treatment he does not seem to get well. They do not have money for it. They have no hope for his treatment from the administration, either. They think Rai Kanchho is dying because they are helpless to support him. The Nepali workers are treated as slaves in the host land in *Muglan*. They cannot speak against the cruel authority at all.

Nostalgia in Dorkha, Bhutan

The tragic death of Lale Subba and the sudden missing of Thule make Sutar Kanchho and his friends gather courage to escape the road work. Rai Kanchho's illness also goes worse day by day. Shekhar Karki also feels sick because of the burns around his face and body from the sparks while bomb-blasting the big rocks as Bhattarai (2012) writes, "He was badly bruised in several places over his body and face. His almost baked left eye was too painful to look at" (p.65). The road work is hard, but the escaping seems harder than the road work. It is a big challenge for them in the "distant place" (McLeod, 2015, p.212) from their homeland. Despite the obstacles, Sutar Kanchho and Shekhar Karki leave the place "across sounds of jackals, wild dogs, deer, boars, hogs and scary sounds of birds and heavy waterfalls flowing, terrorizing the entire forest right from the early hours" (Bhattarai, 2012, p.89). Though they have fear of wild animals, they keep moving ahead with scratches, wounds, hunger, and tiredness. The illness of Shekhar Karki becomes worse and dies at night inside the dense jungle. Sutar Kanchho is shocked alone by the helpless demise of Shekhar Karki: "Baring his bitten teeth, he was lying lifeless. His dark, sunken eyes had turned listless and were staring up towards the sky, giving a scary look" (Bhattarai, 2012, p.96). Sutar Kanchho's helplessness and hopelessness increase as he has none to share his pain with now onwards. Nevertheless, he continues going ahead and reaches Dorkha.

With completely tired and hungry body, Sutar Kanchho arrives in Dorkha, another new place in Bhutan. After days' walk in the dense jungle, he is at a cattle shed belonging to Pakhe Kailo, a kind cattle herd. Sutar Kanchho, who is fully in despair, dispossession, and displacement (Bhattarai, 2012, p.101), is heartily welcomed to the shed. He supports Pakhe Kailo in the shed. He takes the responsibility of taking care

of the cattle. The cattle, the shed and milk remind him of his own he had in Nepal: “He too had once kept and maintained cattle at home in a similar shed, cut grass, made fodder and had dipped himself in milk and yoghurt which had energized and charged him to enthusiasm to join the army one not-so-fine day ” (Bhattarai, 2012, p.107). He is in memory of his home, parents and other family members time and again. He wants to go back home, but only after earning some money. According to S. Leela (2012), when people are dispossessed in the new land, their attachment to home remains high (p.36). He is loyal to his duty due to which he easily wins the trust of Pakhe Kailo. He becomes very close to the family of Pakhe Kailo. He is offered even the hand of Pakhe Kailo’s daughter, Thuli though he is already a married person. During the marriage, he remembers his first marriage, “Long back, on a similar occasion, he had sat with his first bride in the same manner in his tender age” (Bhattarai, 2012, p. 144). He misses his first wife. However, he has to run away leaving his second wife Thuli and the family behind as he is an escapist from the road work and the administration is after him for an arrest.

Nostalgia in Chengmari, Bhutan

Now, Sutar Kanchho arrives in Chengmari and starts working hard for money in order to return home in Nepal. He keeps missing home again and again. Bhattarai (2012) writes, “Tears would well up in his eyes while thinking home and his heart would be overwhelmed with sadness on thinking of the day overcast with fog when Thule had disappeared from his life” (p.152). The memory of Thule’s missing in Phuncheling makes Sutar Kanchho worried. He cannot forget him. They were like more than brothers. In the meantime, he becomes happy when he meets Moktan vai there. He was also one of those who escaped from the road work in Phuncheling. Both of them have a plan to collect money and return home. S. Sujaritha (2009) considers that “...the diasporic community faces several problems and it lends them to be nostalgic about their home country always” (p.125). They are able to make some money, but Moktan vai betrays him as he disappears stealing all his money. Sutar Kanchho becomes “collapsed on the floor” (Bhattarai, 2012, p.157). He is upset since he cannot return home. He is again alone in the foreign land. He has to work much again to recover the stolen amount.

Thuli surprisingly arrives to be with him. They become happy for being together again. They struggle hard for their survival. In addition, he often has nostalgia of home and parents. Bhattarai (2012) writes, “Sometimes, Sutar would become frustrated on not being able to arrange for anything to eat at home. When he would think of his

parents that he had left behind at home, his eyes would become wet. The same pleasing greenery of the estate had turned into a lifeless desert for him (p.162).” It is not easy for them to maintain daily meals in the family. He becomes upset for being unable to do any good for his parents. He has what S. Sujaritha (2009) asserts, “alienation and aloofness as diasporic studies” (180). After few years of it, Sutar Kanchho happens to receive his daughter from his first wife from Nepal. He is excited but sad at the same time hearing about his mother’s death and his first wife’s elopement. Now, he has got only the “memories of home to explore in retrospect” (McLeod, 2015, p.212). They work hard but cannot earn much. Sutar Kanchho suffers from mental problem. He keeps calling ‘Thule.’ He is fully “insane” (Bhattarai, 2012, p.166). His life begins in poverty and ends in the same. He also disappears at the end tragically.

Conclusion

A diasporic situation can be vividly observed in the novel *Muglan* by Bhattarai. Sutar Kanchho, Thule, and their companions have a dream of being Indian army and having a good life. In the host lands, India and Bhutan, they are badly cheated and they suffer from malnutrition because of which some of them die. They regret running away from home in Nepal. They miss family members, relatives, and their cattle at home. They want to return home, but they cannot because they have no money. In diaspora, people either in comfort or in hardships cannot forget their home and homeland. In the moment of difficulties, they become nostalgic more than in other times. Sutar Kanchho and his friends feel highly displaced, alienated, and dislocated since they are not treated well by the people and administration in India and Bhutan. Their desire for returning home and homeland become dense because of the mistreatment. However, they can never return home, but die of poverty in the foreign land helplessly. So, *Muglan* sketches a clear picture of people in diaspora and their experiences. It has helped to enrich literature about Nepali diaspora in India and Bhutan. Therefore, *Muglan* can be a valuable source of studying Nepali diaspora for future researchers.

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